



Women's Participation in Politics and Peace Process of Myanmar

May Yi Myint and Nutthathirataa Withitwinyuchon*

The Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, Rangsit University, Thailand

*Corresponding author, E-mail: nutthathirataa.w@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

Myanmar is one of the earliest countries in Asia that gives women the right to vote and allows them to participate in public activities since 1935. In 1995, many countries around the world decided to sign the Beijing Platform of Action, which aims to achieve women's representation in the national legislature to 30%, and Myanmar also agreed to sign the agreement. Moreover, in 1997, Myanmar signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Despite all those signatories in different treaties, women's involvement in Myanmar in different areas of the society is still low. The main objective of this study is to examine Myanmar women's participation in the politics and peace process of the country as well as to discover the challenges for them to get involved in politics. Data was collected by interviewing different stakeholders from various organizations and parties, as well as from secondary resources such as publications, articles, and books. The key findings of the study indicate that women's participation in politics, the decision-making process, and the peace process will bring positive results for the country. It further shows that women in Myanmar are mainly challenged by the cultural aspects and experience gender-based discrimination in different ways. Women experience restrictions and limitations under the cultural norms of society. Even though women's representation has increased recently, there are still discriminations against women. The inclusion of women in society is not just by means of justice or democratic society but also for the need for equal development of the society.

Keywords: *Women and politics, Myanmar politics, Women's political participation in Myanmar, Women and Peace, Peace process of Myanmar, Gender and politics, Women's rights, Women representation in Parliament of Myanmar, Women parliament members of Myanmar, Women in political life, Women and peace in Myanmar, CEDAW, NSPAW, Gender discrimination,*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Myanmar has been struggling with peacebuilding between the central government and different ethnic armed groups in different states of the country regarding the ruling system, which resulted in over sixty years of continuing civil wars, and the country is still figuring out the solution by negotiating with different ethnic armed groups. Up until today, the Myanmar government has initiated a lot of peace talks with the ethnic armed groups to sign the ceasefire agreement but an agreement has not been reached yet. In 2015, the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed for the first time with eight out of sixteen Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). However, there are still conflicts happening with those signed groups, and the agreement could be considered failed (Transnational Institute, 2016).

Many scholars have pointed out that the result will be much effective if women were included in the peace talks because women have different experiences and different perspectives in finding solutions. Every conflict and civil war affects women and men differently, thus, it is essential to take account of women's perspectives in negotiations. However, while all the men are discussing peacebuilding, women's voices are not represented in the discussion table. Women are rarely invited in the peace talks and peace-building process until today. Women in Myanmar are still paid less attention and considered the minority role in the peace process and political transition of the country (Khen & Nyo, 2014).

Myanmar had been under the military regime for over sixty years, and the community has fallen into a men-leading society. The role of women in society and community activities especially in political affairs had been eliminated for many years. Women are considered as the second class of society and do not concern with social activities. Women themselves also believe that they need to be good housewives and support men



from the back while they are doing social activities. It becomes a traditional norm of the country and is becoming a challenge for women today to become a leader (Transnational Institute, 2016).

The world's view on gender representation has been changing for many years, and people's demand for equality in society has increased. People noticed that the role of women is becoming increasingly important to have balance in society. For Myanmar, women themselves learned the importance of their role in society only when the country has opened up to the international connection after 2010. Compare with the previous times when the country was under the military regime, more women are now getting involved in community activities (Transnational Institute, 2016). However, even though women's engagements in the community activities have increased, there are still limitations for women from the formal participation such as being represented in the parliaments, nation-wide peace talk, and decision-making process.

Human Rights Perspective: Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

On December 18, 1979, the United Nations adopted the international treaty called the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which aims to protect and take action against any form of discrimination against women. The Convention provides a framework to ensure equality between men and women in their political and public life. It is also the only international treaty that emphasizes the influences of cultural, social barriers, and gender relations on the issue of equality. According to Article 1 of CEDAW, discrimination can be any form of exclusion or restriction to anyone based on their sex from taking part in political, social, economic, cultural, and other forms of activities. Articles 7 and 8 are stated to ensure women have the right to vote, to allow them to formally participate in the public sectors, as well as giving them equal opportunities as men in presenting themselves in their society, country, and international level (OHCHR, n.d.). Moreover, it also points out that the participation of women can bring different results at all levels of nation-building such as peacekeeping, peace negotiations at the national, regional, and international levels, preventive diplomacy, humanitarian affairs, and other areas (United Nations, 2013).

The CEDAW Committee explains that the priority focus of the Convention is to ensure that women's human rights are protected at all times and to include women's diverse experiences in all levels of peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and reconstruction process. It also mentions that women and girls are usually the victims of gender-based violence and sexual violence of the conflict. However, women are not invited or excluded from the formal peacemaking process and conflict preventions. As the result, the solutions often come out as gender-blind conflict resolutions, which cannot prevent and solve the conflicts. Thus, the committee suggests inviting female stakeholders and analyzing the conflict by gender-based analysis. In the committee's recommendation regarding implementation of CEDAW, it included assuring that women are not restricted from getting involved in the government structure, encouraging equal representation of men and women in peacebuilding, negotiations, and decision-making at the national level, and providing training for women that will enhance their leadership abilities (United Nations, 2013).

Myanmar signed CEDAW in 1997 and initiated the ten-year plan called the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013-2022 for the development of women (UNFPA, 2013). However, according to the analysis of Gender Equality Network, the implementation of NSPAW and its outlines are incompatible with CEDAW because the action plans highly include restrictive gender stereotypes and do not align with gender equality promotion and protection of women's rights. Additionally, the government sectors, including the Department of Social Welfare who oversees the NSPAW, have a low level of understanding of gender equality and women's rights. Similarly, the existing constitution does not fulfill the satisfaction of CEDAW requirements because the constitution contains direct and indirect gender discriminating laws (UN Women, n.d.-b).

Definition of Terms

Women's Participation. Women's participation is the essential requisite of gender equality as well as the essence of a democratic society. It emphasizes the direct engagement of women in public life and the decision-making of the community (UN Women, n.d.-a).



Human Rights. Human rights are the fundamental inherent rights of human beings regardless of nationalities, races, sex, ethnicity, origin, the color of the skin, or any other type.

Women's Rights. Women's rights are also a part of human rights that put more emphasis on the right to education, right to vote, right to equal opportunity, right to own property, and free from violence, discrimination, and slavery (Global Fund for Women, n.d.).

Aims

Giving all the reasons above, it is very important to learn that why women's participation is important in society, why Myanmar women are still having obstacles, what are those obstacles that hinder them to get into formal participation, and what can be done to improve the situations for women. This research will be mainly examining the women's participation in the peace-building process of Myanmar while discussing the role of women and their importance in the peace process. The focus timeline of the study will be between 1995 to 2020 to study the changes in women's participation after the signatory of the Beijing Declaration.

1.2 Literature Review

Women and Politics: Why Does It Matter?

Since 1995, the world has been trying to include women in political affairs and promote women's representation in the parliament. In 2002, women's representation in parliament was 15% globally, and it has increased to 19.8% in 2012 (National Democratic Institute NDI, n.d.). According to the data as of October 2020, the global scale for women's representation in the parliament has increased to 25.1%, which is close to the quota that the world is aiming for (IPU Parline, 2020). The question is why is women's participation in politics important? and why the whole world is trying to reach that quota?

Women make up over half of the population in the world and it is undeniable that every matter of society requires to include the voice of half of the population. More importantly, politics, peace, stability, and development of the country need to involve women's perspectives to make decisions that will affect the whole society (Human Rights Watch, 2011). According to the research, having gender balance in decision-making results in better decisions. Moreover, the places where women are involved in the decision-making process obtain a better result than the places where there are no women involved. When looking at many countries throughout the world, women politicians are seen as more responsive and reliable than men politicians. Research shows that women tend to work harder than men because it is harder for them to get a position as a leader, and they feel the burden of the need to prove that they deserve the place. Moreover, the policies of the country are hugely influenced by the legislator, and the policy's focus depends on whether the legislator is male or female. There are proofs that in the countries where there are more female policymakers, the policies tend to emphasize social equality, family concerns, and minorities of the society. Including women in politics makes the policies more socially inclusive and brings more positive solutions that impact the families' matters, society, and the country as a whole.

Furthermore, studies show that women are dedicated to creating a peaceful society, and thus, they are more committed to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. In the society where women are involved in the peace process, it has long-term success in peace agreements and governance. Inviting women in the early stages of the peace-making process brings more stability in peacekeeping and helps eliminate the corruption issues of the governance. Some say that peace talks are the conversations about how to stop fighting, and women do not need to involve in the peace talks because they do not involve in fighting. Studies deny that fact and say that women also suffer from the fights; they are even the ones who suffer more than men. Excluding women from peace talks makes the process even longer and could not get the solution that impacts every stakeholder. Women have different life experiences regardless of their social status or education level. Those experiences are crucial in considering social policies. The fact that combining women's perspectives in decision-making has resulted in better policies and solutions to social problems. It is important for men and women together in every decision-making process.

Women and Politics in Myanmar

In the conflicts and civil wars in Myanmar, women are the ones who suffer the most. When husbands join the armed groups, they have to left the family and some died in the war or come back disabled. So,



women have to take care of the whole family for security, food, run for their lives, and live with fear every day. Moreover, women in the warzone are usually the victims of sexual abuse and are threatened by the military and armed groups. However, these stories are not heard by the public and rarely discussed (Human Rights Watch, 2016). To be heard these stories by the public and find the solution for them, more women are needed to play a role. Culturally, women in Myanmar, especially those from ethnic villages and rural areas, do not feel comfortable talking to men openly. To make them comfortable to talk about their stories and present their voices at the peace tables, women representatives are more suitable and understand better on the problems. When it comes to the peace process, the role of women is important not just because they have suffered from the conflicts and civil wars but they are also important for bringing long-lasting peace agreements. However, the only chance that women get to be involved in peace talks is so-called “Teak Break Advocacy” where the delegates of the peace talks take a tea break from the negotiation and women have to present their ideas and persuade the delegates to discuss their idea in the peace table (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Women should get more chances to be able to discuss the problems and find out solutions behind the tables.

In the past 60 years, Myanmar had been under a military regime where there was no freedom in political movements for both men and women. In 2010, the new semi-civilian government came into power, and people have had more freedom. The country opened up and experienced international exposure at all levels. Along with that, Myanmar also gives more attention to social problems such as human rights issues, gender equality, and the role of women in society. However, women have been facing different kinds of limitations to involve in the social and political arena. In the research of Latt, Ninh, Myint, and Lee (2017), they found out that political participation is a major challenge for women in Myanmar. Even though more women are getting involved in political parties throughout the whole country, they are challenged by the policies and practices of the parties. Among over 90 political parties of Myanmar, only a few of them put consideration on having policies that promote women’s participation and leave the place for women candidates. Almost 90% of the parties are influenced by males and usually, the Central Executive Committee members are males. Besides, only 6% of the female leaders have positions in decision-making in state-level or district-level organizations. Some of the factors that hinder women from taking leadership roles include the level of experiences and skills that women have and the cultural norms that have been practicing in the country for a long time. Additionally, women themselves do not have enough confidence to participate in political parties (Latt, Ninh, Myint, and Lee, 2017).

Cultural norms of Myanmar

Even though the current State Counselor of Myanmar, Aung San Su Kyi, is a powerful leader, there are many challenges for other women in Myanmar to be able to involve in politics (Maber, 2016). According to the finding of Minoletti (2016), it argued that one of the challenges in Myanmar politics is the cultural norms of the society that lessen the opportunities for women to involve in many important issues. Myanmar society has been led by men for a long time, and it has impacted women’s capacity in leadership. Women usually do not get involved in public affairs, and if they do so, they are less likely to speak up. Women do not have strong confidence in the public discussions relative to men, and their opinions are usually put less weight. The leadership style of the society is largely influenced by the cultural norms that people believed a long ago. Society believes that leadership and raising the voice is masculinity, and thus, men should be the leaders. For women, society teaches them to be polite, behave with modesty, and speak properly, which includes not speaking level up with men. Also, in the 2008 constitution, Article 352 states that the places where the positions are only suitable for men will only have to appoint men. It means that there are places that women are prohibited by law to become what they want to be. From a human rights perspective, this article directly violates women’s rights and discriminate against women from men (Minoletti, 2016). The research has also found that women take other women as their role models and comfortable speaking up to women leaders than men. Women tend to speak up about their problems in the meetings and discussions when the head of the village is a woman. Similarly, when women are taking leading positions in any institution, there is more likely to have more women around them. It could be an effective solution for Myanmar to promote women’s leadership in the political process in the future (Minoletti, 2016).



2. Objectives

- 1) To examine the participation of women in the decision-making of peacebuilding and politics since 1995.
- 2) To study the main challenges of women in Myanmar to get involved in the political arena.
- 3) To give suggestions for the government of Myanmar, LNGOs, INGOs, and CSO about the improvement of women's participation in politics and the peace process.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Type of Research

This research was done by qualitative research based on documentary research method to examine the existing information of the issue and real-life problems of people engaged in the politics of Myanmar. The main source of data was the secondary sources, in which the research brought issues from historical background and current issues of the country, as well as the statistics and numbers for the women representation in the parliament and peace process. The research questions and the area of study related to the research objects were the best suited to use the documentary method. To clarify and supplement the findings from the secondary data, the researchers used primary data by conducting interviews with five people, including two women from the parliament and three from well-known NGOs.

3.2 Limitation of the study

The field of research was related to the political structure and governmental process of the country, which required data from the government agencies and individuals from government sectors to clarify the information better. Besides, since the research was examining the peace process of Myanmar, it would be more relevant to collect the data from both governmental institutions and non-governmental institutions. However, the research rarely included the data from the government press because it was difficult to get information from government websites since many of them were inactive. Moreover, the Myanmar government rarely does research papers and publications about the peace and gender issues of the country, and the country is still having a lot of difficulties and challenges regarding information transparency and research development. Regarding the interviewees, even though the researcher tried to reach out to male MPs to get balance perspectives, they were either busy or not willing to answer the interview.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

For the data collection, the researchers interviewed some female MPs and election-winning candidates from different parties. The interviews were conducted between September to November 2020 via online platforms. The interviewees included men and women from different LNGOs and INGOs who were working on female and youth empowerment programs, gender equality and LGBTQ rights, and capacity-building training for the MPs in different areas of the country. The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions were designed to elicit the participants' views and personal experiences throughout the journey of women's participation in politics from 1995 to 2020. The use of the secondary sources for this research mostly were publications from LNGOs and INGOs that were closely working with the Myanmar government.

In terms of data analysis, the data were analyzed using information from both primary and secondary sources. Therefore, key findings of the research mainly relied on secondary sources and were supplemented with interviews with MPs and members of different organizations. The findings from the interviews supported the data derived from related studies, reports, and publications by NGOs, news reports, books, journals, and other secondary sources. The data analysis emphasized the research objectives and included additional findings as well.

**Table 1** List of Interviewees

	Sex	Age	Organization	Date of Interview (dd/mm/yy)
Interviewee 1	Female	52	Sandhi Governance Institute	12/09/2020
Interviewee 2	Male	35	Yone Kyi Yar (Capacity Building Trainings for MPs)	25/09/2020
Interviewee 3	Female	31	NLD Party, Me, Lower House	31/09/2020
Interviewee 4	Female	32	Feminist Activist	10/10/2020
Interviewee 5	Male	37	Gender Equality Network	22/10/2020
Interviewee 6	Male	32	Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy-DIPD Myanmar	25/10/2020
Interviewee 7	Female	54	NLD Party, MP, Upper House	9/11/2020
Interviewee 8	Female	26	Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS)	9/11/2020
Interviewee 9	Female	29	NLD Party, 2020 Election Winning Candidate	11/11/2020

Table 2 List of Interview Questions

No.	Questions
1	Could you introduce yourself? Name, age, organization name, and position at your organization
2	What do you think about women's participation in politics? Do you think women's participation is important? Why or why not?
3	How do you think women's participation in the peacebuilding process of Myanmar? Do you think it is necessary/ important? Why or why not?
4	Do you satisfy the current representation of women in the politics and peace-building process of Myanmar?
5	What do you think are the main obstacles for Myanmar women to get involved in the politics and peace process?
6	To what extent do the cultural norms affect the political interest of Myanmar women
7	What are the difficulties of women who are already engaged in the political affairs and peace process of the country?
8	Do you think people in Myanmar consider women in political participation and peace process are important? To what extent?
9	What should have done to bring more women into political affairs and peacebuilding?

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The Obstacles of Women's Participation and Peace Building of Myanmar: Cultural Barriers

The long-existing cultural norms and customs of the society are the main obstacles for women to take leadership positions relative to men. Society is hugely dominated by men as well as the social structure. Women are considered as the second class of society and have to live low profile under social standards (Interviewee 1, personal communication, September 12, 2020). The research done by Oxfam INGO regarding the gender and politics of Myanmar found that the most challenging issue for women in Myanmar is that society believes that gender inequality is not a serious issue for Myanmar. Moreover, most people including a lot of women themselves do not know that there is gender inequality exists in society. For instance, the Minister of the President's Office, U Soe Maung, said that Myanmar has only a small amount of gender discrimination, which is not as worse as other Asian countries, and women in Myanmar have equal rights as men in both constitutionally and traditionally. However, in reality, the equality status of Myanmar is at the lowest level among other Asian countries in terms of investment and in core social services that will



overwhelmingly benefit women. It indicates that gender inequality has been seen as a normal issue in Myanmar and will not be put as a priority for the changes (Oxfam, 2016).

Most of the interviewees responded that they had a difficult time getting approval from the family to work in the political field. The parents think that working in the political field is not a career choice for women. Besides, they do not want their daughters working relative to men because it is culturally thought inappropriate and those women are usually judged by society. One of the interviewees who won the recent election said that her parents like and support other women leaders but they do not want to see their daughter in that place. One of the reasons is that they want to see her in a very typical girl manner, in which she has to act polite, gentle, and quiet and is contrasting to what election candidates do. Another reason is that they want her to live in a low profile because women who do politics get a lot of public attention and are usually judged negatively by society. They think that doing politics is dangerous for women as well as for the family (Interviewee 8, personal communication, November 11, 2020). Women who are already married have to ask for permission from their husbands to get into political parties or to register as the election candidate. An interviewee said she was asked by the party whether she got approval from her husband to run the election. Even though they did not ask for an official document from her husband, they made sure that she got permission for it. However, men candidates do not have that issue because men are considered as the head of household. There are even some women party members who do not get permission from their husbands to run the election (Interviewee 6, personal communication, November 9, 2020).

The other challenge is that younger people are not allowed to raise their voice over or against older people. Usually, older people do not listen to what youngsters say, and only the voice of older people is taken into action (Latt, 2017). One of the women MP says that since she is a younger MP, her opinions and suggestions are always neglected in the discussion tables; however, when the other male MP says the same thing, they accept and take into consideration what he said. People think that politics is more suitable for men and requires experience and people think that women, especially younger ones know less about politics and inexperience. Thus, young women MPs are not considered as important and welcomed by others, even by other older women MPs (Interviewee 3, personal communication, September 31, 2020).

Another challenge is that women in the society want to see only men leading their society directed by the social norms, thus they do not support women candidates (Latt, 2017). A current woman MP said from her experience that she had to try harder to get votes from other women. Men in her campaign region have a better understanding of politics and take into consideration of candidates' capacity and the party they are representing. However, women do not have much knowledge and prefer men candidates from other parties over her. After some time, she learned the lesson that she first tried to advocate men to vote for her then asked men to tell their wives to vote for her as well. "That is how our society works," she said so since women tend to listen to what their husbands say and follow them. These cultural barriers make it more difficult for women to get a place in the political arena (Interviewee 6, personal communication, 2020).

Educational Barrier

The education system of the country does not provide or encourage women to get involved in politics. There are many women politicians and activists throughout history who had done significant works for the country. However, they are not included in the school textbooks, and the children did not be taught that women can also be politicians. Only men politicians are expressed as heroes of the country. The education system teaches the children that there are only male politicians and doing politics is a man's job. The result of this can be seen that fewer women are interested in politics compared with men (Interviewee 2, personal communication, September 25, 2020). Agreeing with the findings, when Aung San Su Kyi became the leader of the country, Myanmar women's response to politics has increased a lot and they take her as a role model. Taking this into account, the children should be given both female and male leaders as their role models in the political field so that they will get the mindset that politics is related to everyone (Loring, 2018).

Another fact that women are struggling in terms of education is that women need to have more qualifications than men to be the candidates. For men, it is easy to become the election candidate without proper educational status and people say that experience and personality are more important than their educational background. Men who are actively involved in social activities easily get approved by the public



and are seen as qualified candidates. Several male MPs in the parliament are only high school graduates (Latt, Ninh, Myint & Lee, 2017). However, for women to become the candidate, they have to have proper education with at least a bachelor degree regardless of how much they have been involved in social activities. Women are seen as less educated than men by society, and the parties take that into account when choosing the candidates to run the election. They only choose women candidates who hold a higher degree or with certain educational status. Women candidates have to try harder than men to get approved by the public. Usually, when the parties announce the candidates who will run the election, people pay attention to the women candidates and check their background and personal life more than to men candidates. Moreover, women candidates face more cyberbullying and sexual abuse on social media than men candidates. People often make jokes about young women candidates and attack them for being female candidates. For these reasons, the political parties make sure that they have perfect women candidates with higher education levels (Interviewee 3, personal communication, September 31, 2020), which challenges women to be the candidates and represent in the parliament.

Women Representation in Parliaments of Myanmar

The historic general election was held in 2010, and it transformed the country from over sixty years of the military government to the first semi-civilian government. In the first year of the parliament in 2011, only 3.5% of the women were elected to attend the parliament. Twenty women candidates out of 114 were elected to be the MPs to the 659 seats national parliament (Loring, 2018). In 2012 by-elections, the women representatives had increased to 6% and reached 13% in the 2015 election. The 2015 national wide election elected 151 women parliament members, and some of them were appointed as ethnic affairs ministers. Female MPs got 67 out of 591 elected seats, which accounted for 13.7% of the total elected seat. Among all, only 23 women MPs represented in the Upper House, so-called Amyotha Hluttaw, while 44 women MPs were in the lower house called Pyithu Hluttaw. These figures excluded the women MPs from the military side because the military possesses 25% of the parliament seats according to the 2008 constitution. When combining the 2 women MPs appointed by the military, the total female MPs represented 69 seats out of 757 and 10.7% of the total seats (Latt, 2017). As of 2020 statistics, the percentage of women representatives in Myanmar's parliaments reached 15.3%. (See figure 1).

For the 2020 general election, National Lead for Democracy (NLD) party led by Aung San Su Kyi included 20% female candidates to run the election. In the previous election in 2015, the party included only 13% of women candidates. The NLD set a 30% quota inside the party for the 2020 election and announced that the party gave more chance to women, youth, and ethnic minorities in selecting the candidates to run the election among equally qualified candidates. However, the military-backed opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), did not have a quota and selected only 2.6% of women candidates (Duell, 2020). Daw Khin Lay Nge, a woman advocate from Phan Tee Eain's gender equality network said in an interview that she welcomes the NLD's action for increasing the number of women candidates but other opposition parties and ethnic parties should also give more chance to women (Lei, 2020). Compare with the previous election in 2012, women's interest in politics and people's stand for women candidates has increased dramatically. One of the reasons was because of Aung San Su Kyi who led the government successfully. Also, confronting the Rohingya issue at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2019 drew public attention, and people gave applause for the way she managed the issue. Besides, her government properly managed the COVID-19 in the first wave such as doing virtual meetings with stakeholders from different sectors and listen to people who were remarked by the public as good governance for the country. She stands as a role model for the women of the country, and more women get interested in politics because of her (Bemma, 2020). As a result, in the recent election held on November 8th, 2020, 17% of women MP were elected nationwide, securing 194 seats of 1117 total seats in both Upper House and Lower House (Zue, 2020).

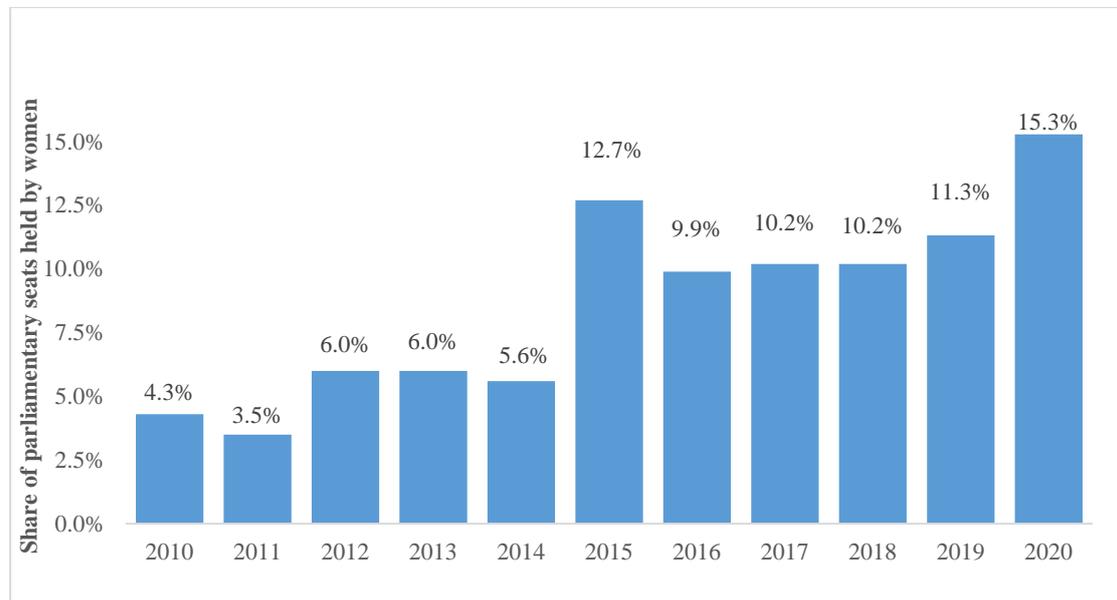


Figure 1 Representation of Women in the Parliament of Myanmar from 2010-2020

Figure 1 shows the changes in the number of women parliament members from 2010 to 2019. It has increased from 4.3% in 2010 to 15.3% in 2020 (Statista, 2020).

Discrimination inside the Parties

While the country is trying to get more women's participation in politics, the political parties themselves do not support women party members and election candidates. Even though the current leading party NLD said that it tries to reach a 30% quota, women inside the party are discriminated against in many ways. For instance, when appointing the region for running the election campaigns, men candidates get to choose the regions they are sure or more likely to win. Usually, women candidates are given places where they are less likely to win or where other candidates do not want to go. One of the reasons is because women candidates are younger and seen as having less experience to choose their region by themselves (Interviewee 2, 5, 6 & 7, personal communication, September 25, October 22, 25, & November 9, 2020).

One of the current woman MPs says that she has been treated unequally even by her own party. During the campaign period of the 2015 election, she was an election-running candidate but did not get equal resources as men from her party. She said that the party put priority on male candidates and supported them with resources such as budget, transportation, and human resources to help them to go campaigns in different places. However, she did not get enough and mostly used her own money and car to go for campaigns. Moreover, she was given a very far place that no one wants to go for the campaign. She had to travel overnight to those places and faced many difficulties during her campaign period. At one point, she said the party thinks that women candidates are less likely to win the election compared with men candidates, thus they only pay attention to those who are popular and more likely to win. Similarly, male MPs in the parliament do not support female MPs even they come from the same party. At the same time, even though women MPs are willing to learn and work in any area, men rarely have the same mindset. People think that child rape and other child-related issues are more suitable for women because the spirit of motherhood can understand the cases better. Whenever there is a child rape case, they always assign the case to women MPs. Male MPs never try to take charge of the cases because they think that it is not suitable for them. They never try to understand the issue and do not have the willingness to learn as well (Interviewee 6, personal communication, November 9, 2020).



Another fact is that women who are members of the political parties are often given the position of personal assistant or secretary for men. They are not considered to be the leaders of the parties. Women are not considered as important persons in the meetings and have to do other things like making coffee and preparing snacks for the meeting attendants while others are discussing important issues. They can only join after they have done with preparing other things. Occasionally, they also have to do announcer for ceremonies, meetings, and other events and are often used as objects for ceremonies. Thus, the parties usually favor those who have good looking rather than quality, which encourages women to quit the parties (Interviewee 5 & 6, personal communication, October 22 & 25, 2020).

Wrong Direction of Peace Process

The research by Faxon, Furlong, and Phyu (2015) stated that women in Myanmar are usually ignored and excluded when it comes to peace talks and peace negotiations. During the military regime, there was no women's involvement in the peace process at all. At the beginning of the civilian government, the government operated two peace talks in 2011 where official invitations went for 12 men but no women. In the following year in 2012, the Myanmar government initiated the Union Peace-Making Central Committee to escalate the peace process of Myanmar, and the whole committee was formed with only 11 men. Continuously, the other committee called the Union Peace-Making Working Committee (UPWC) was formed with 52 men and 2 women (See Table 2). It can be seen that only 2% of women can involve in the governmental institutions for peacebuilding (Faxon, Furlong, Phyu, 2015).

According to Minoletti (2016), the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in 2015 by eight EAGs can be mentioned as the effort of women representatives in the committee. As a consequence, in 2016 the Union Peace Conference (UPC) agreed to achieve women representation to 30% in the peacebuilding process of Myanmar (Minoletti, 2016). In the Union Peace Conference (UPC), women's participation had increased from 13% in 2016 to 22% in 2018. However, as of 2019, there were only 4 women out of 78 representatives who could engage in the NCA mechanisms, meaning that only a few women were included as signatories and in the decision-making (Khullar, 2019).

It is undeniable that women need to participate in the peace talks. However, according to the experience of some interviewees, people who are sitting at the peace negotiation table are talking about women's involvement in the peace table rather than discussing peace negotiation with armed groups. At some point, it could be because only a few women are physically involved in the peace table, and they advocate people at the peace table to talk about this issue. An interviewee said that this is the problem with women activists because they need to set the right way of doing advocacy. They should try to include more women at the peace table or if not, they should rather advocate men to present their ideas and the voice of women at the peace table. The point is either women themselves presenting the problems at the peace talks or letting men representatives present their ideas on behalf of them (Interviewee 1 & 6, personal communication, September 12 & October 25, 2020).

Table 3 The Number of Women in Different Peace Building Institutes

Entity	Year	Total Number of Participants	Number of Female Participants	Number of Male Participants
Union Peacemaking Central Committee (UPCC)	2012	22	0	22
Union Peacemaking Working Committee (UPWC)	2012	52	2	50
Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT)	2013	16	1	15
Joint Implementation Coordination Meeting	2015	16	0	16



Entity	Year	Total Number of Participants	Number of Female Participants	Number of Male Participants
Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC)	2015	48	3	45
Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JCMC – Union Level)	2015	26	0	26
Senior Delegation (SD)	2015	15	2	13
National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC)	2016	11	2	9

Table 2 shows the number of committee members who are involving in the peace process of Myanmar. It can be seen that only a few women are appointed in the peace process (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

4.2 Discussion

As the information presented above, women in Myanmar have been marginalized in terms of political participation for many years. They have been neglected to take part in any important issues of the country, especially in peacebuilding. However, according to Minoletti (2016), the government had realized the capacity of women and the benefits of women's participation in the peace process. So, it agreed to adopt the quota of 30% women in peacebuilding. If the country can achieve this quota in a few years, there would be some changes in the politics of Myanmar, particularly the peacebuilding process. Since the country has been trying to end the civil wars and finish the negotiation for many years, the increase of women in the peace talks would be another hope for the future (Minoletti, 2016).

According to the findings from the literature, Myanmar is having struggles in loosening the gender inequality gap in society. Having said that people in Myanmar, including the government officials, do not think women are treated unequally. Society thinks that it is normal for women to live at a lower level than men since the cultural norms have influenced people in that way. The most challenging factor for the change is that people do not see gender inequality issue as an important issue and do not put it as a priority. However, since a lot of organizations are working on the issue and forcing the government to include women, it has some impacts on women's participation. Also, when Aung San Su Kyi became the leader of the government, women were encouraged and got some acceptance from society. In the long run, it is believed that women will get more positions in the political issues and peace process of Myanmar (Latt, Ninh, Myint, & Lee, 2017).

According to the findings from the in-depth interviews, the most obstacles for women are the cultural norms of society, which makes it more difficult for the society to change since it involved the belief system of the whole society. Additionally, people are very conservatives when it comes to cultural factors because they think that culture is something that has been practicing in the country for so long and cannot be changed. Besides, most people in society, even women themselves, do not think that it is a problem. It seems that only those who are engaged in politics know the problems of the cultural norms. To change the belief system, there should be more advocacy and awareness programs that reach the whole society throughout the country (Interviewee 4 & 5, personal communication, October 10 & 22, 2020).

In terms of the current representation of women in politics, it is clear that women's representation has increased double within ten years. However, it is only 17% and still far from a 30% quota. Most of the political parties do not consider implementing the quota in their parties. Scholars say that government should encourage every party to set the quota as a party's policy as it is the best way to attract qualified women to the political field (Lei, 2020). On the other hand, there are concerns that the system might give chance to unqualified candidates. At some point, there might be problems of choosing unqualified female candidates



over qualified male candidates because of the quota. An interviewee argues that the quota should be set to bring more women but does not require to be exact. At the same time, while the leaders of the countries are trying to increase the percentage of women, there are a lot of problems that women are facing at the bottom of the system. Discriminating women who are already engaged in politics will have a severe effect on their participation in the long run. These issues need to be solved immediately, and the parties should also adopt equal policies for the party members (Interviewee 3, 6, & 8, personal communication, September 31, November 9 & 11, 2020).

When talking about women's involvement in peacebuilding, it does not necessarily mean that women need to take positions at the peace table. For women to be involved in the peace talks, they can involve in the meetings behind the peace tables and present their ideas. It does not matter whether men or women are sitting at the peace table but what matters is they are representing the voice of everyone. In terms of decision-making, it is still challenging for the country because the leaders think that women are not related to the peace process and women cannot make a decision for the country, which in turn makes it difficult for women to get positions at the peace table. However, the question is why don't they give them a chance to try? If women are not invited only because they seem unable to do so, they will never be able to do it. Women should have the chance to try and learn from others so that they know how to do it and have confidence in themselves. If they are inexperienced and seem incapable, they should be taught and get experience in it.

5. Conclusion

The development of the country is hugely dependent on the human development of the country, and every individual should have the equal opportunity to develop themselves. Women make up over half of the population in Myanmar, and the capacity of the women in the society also determines the development of the country. If half of the population is neglected, marginalized, and discriminated against, the development of the country will be imbalanced and cannot move forward faster. If half of the population is not qualified enough to be involved, the country should promote and empower them to become qualified ones. They cannot be left behind just because they are incapable of and inexperienced. It would be a waste of resources if they are not counted. To promote their capacity and abilities and increase their engagement with society, there should not be barriers blocking them from doing so.

To bring back the research objectives, the main barriers for women in Myanmar to be involved in politics are found as cultural and educational barriers, which are the main factors that hinder and disturb them from being involved in politics in the first place. In terms of women's leadership in the community, the public shows doubt in their leadership ability, and women are discriminated against in different ways. The new finding of the research can be seen that women experience discrimination by their parties and that disturbs their motivation to continue their journey. Despite all these facts, women's participation in politics has increased year by year. The current status of women representing in the parliament has increased from 11.11% to 17% after the result of the 2020 election. However, the percentage of women's representation in the formal peace talks remains low. Even though women are included in the peace-building process, only a few are invited to formal peace talks and decision-making processes.

To be able to overcome all these barriers and struggles, everyone in the society, most importantly, government, political parties, NGOs, INGOs, CBOs, CSOs should cooperate and promote the role of women. Women getting involved in society is not just a matter of women, it is the matter of everyone in society.

5.1 Recommendations

- 1) Government should encourage the political parties to adopt a quota system within their parties and encourage them to welcome qualified members.
- 2) Political parties should set up clear rules and regulations of selecting party members, election candidates, quota, and resource allocation of the party.
- 3) The government, NGOs, INGOs, CBOs, and CSOs should advocate and give awareness to the public, especially to the rural areas about the importance of women in society and politics.



4) The government, NGOs, INGOs, CBOs, and CSOs should organize the activities and provide training for women to enhance their abilities and capacity to be able to lead society.

5) The government should adjust the curriculums at every level of the education system that emphasizes the importance of gender equality in every matter of society.

6. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank to everyone who has involved and support me in every process of my research. I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Dr. Nutthathirataa Withitwinyuchon for giving her time, guidance, patience, and tremendous supports towards my research. I would like to extend my gratitude to H.E Mr. Sompong Sanguanbun and Dr. Sasiphattra Siriwato for suggesting me the topic and study area. This research could not have been accomplished without their support. I also would like to thank the interviewees from different organizations and political parties for giving their time regardless of their busy schedules in the election period. They have been very enthusiastic and patient to answer all the questions. May I extend my gratitude to the committee members; Dr. Nutthathiratta Withitwinyuchon, Dr. Sasiphattra Siriwato, and Dr. Benjamin D. King for giving me suggestions and advice for further improvements. I also would like to thank my friends and individuals who have given me additional supports, suggestions, and improvements at every stage of my paper. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their spiritual supports and the Child's Dream Foundation for giving me this opportunity to study at Rangsit University and fulfilling my dream.

7. References

- Bemma, A. (2020). *Myanmar Women Seek Social and Political Change in 2020*. Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8757>
- Duell, K. (2020). *Advancement strategies for women's leadership in Myanmar's politics*. Retrieved from https://www.kas.de/documents/263228/0/English+Version_Advancement+Strategies+for+Women.pdf/427f6075-2c88-5ae4-302a-c0d572421e3f?version=1.0&t=1591804652737
- Faxon, H., Furlong, R., & Sabe Phyu, M. (2015). Reinvigorating resilience: violence against women, land rights, and the women's peace movement in Myanmar. *Gender & Development, 23*(3), 463–479. doi: 10.1080/13552074.2015.1095559
- Global Fund for Women. (n.d.). *Women's human rights*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/womens-human-rights/>
- Human Rights Watch. (2016). "A gentleman's agreement". Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/25/gentlemans-agreement>
- Human Rights Watch. (2011). *Why women in politics matter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/24/why-women-politics-matter>
- IPU Parline. (2020). *IPU comparative data on Percentage of women*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from https://data.ipu.org/compare?field=chamber%3A%3Acurrent_women_percent@ion=asia&subregion=south_east_asia&structure=any_lower_chamber#bar
- Khen, S. I., & Nyoï, M. Y. H. (2014). *Looking at the Current Peace Process in Myanmar through a Gender Lens*. Retrieved from <https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/downloads/Articles/4ff70ad542/Looking-at-the-Current-Peace-Process-in-Myanmar-through-a-Gender-Lens-14-swisspeace-reflection-research.pdf>
- Khullar, A. (2019). *Women's Participation in Myanmar's Peace Process*. Retrieved from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5610
- Latt, S. S. S. (2017). *Current women's political affairs in Myanmar parliaments*. Retrieved from <https://www.bnionline.net/en/opinion/op-ed/item/2801-current-women-s-political-affairs-in-myanmar-parliaments.html>



- Latt, S. S. S., Ninh, K. N. B., Myint, M. K. K., & Lee, S. (2017). *Women's Political Participation in Myanmar: Experiences of Women Parliamentarians 2011-2016*. Retrieved from https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Womens-Political-Participation-in-Myanmar-MP-Experiences_report-1.pdf
- Lei, L. (2020). *NLD Selects 20% Female Candidates for Myanmar's November Election*. Retrieved from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/nld-selects-20-female-candidates-myanmars-november-election.html>
- Loring, N. (2018). Overcoming barriers: Myanmar's recent elections and women's political participation. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 59(1), 74–86. doi: 10.1111/apv.12177
- Maber, E. J. T. (2016). Finding feminism, finding voice? Mobilising community education to build women's participation in Myanmar's political transition. *Gender and Education*, 28(3), 416–430. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1167175
- Minoletti, P. (2016). *Gender (In) Equality in the Governance of Myanmar: Past, Present, and Potential Strategies for Change*. Retrieved from https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Gender-in-Equality-in-the-governance-of-myanmar_Policy-Brief_ENG.pdf
- National Democratic Institute (NDI). (n.d.). *Why Women in Politics*. Retrieved August 2020, from https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:KU_S3VVVyUUJ:https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Handout%25204%2520-%2520Why%2520Women%2520in%2520Politics.doc+%26cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=th
- OHCHR. (n.d.-b). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>
- Oxfam. (2016). *Political gender quotas: key debates and values for Myanmar*. Retrieved from https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/dp-political-gende-quotas-myanmar-280516-en.pdf
- Transnational Institute. (2016). *No Women, No Peace: Gender Equality, Conflict and Peace in Myanmar*. Retrieved from https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/myanmar_briefing_18.pdf
- UNFPA. (2013). *The national strategic plan for the advancement of women (2013-2022)*. Retrieved from https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/NSPAW2013-2022_0.pdf
- United Nations. (2013). *General recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/hrbodies/cedaw/gcomments/cedaw.c.g.30.pdf>
- UN Women. (n.d.-a). *Political participation of women*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/governance/political-participation-of-women#:~:text=Women's%20political%20participation%20is%20a,ensuring%20better%20accountability%20to%20women>
- UN Women. (n.d.-b). *Myanmar*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/cedaw-human-rights/myanmar>
- Zue, Z. (2020). *Proportion of women in Myanmar's legislatures rises following Nov. 8 election*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/proportion-women-myanmars-legislatures-rises-following-nov-8-election.html>